PATTERNS OF POWER

By Default

Why a Settled Order Needs No Conspiracy — How Defending One's Own Position Becomes, by Default, the Defence of the Whole Arrangement, and Why Position and Not Sincerity Is the Only Thing About the Powerful One Can Read

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Preface

A single question has surfaced again and again across this project, because it feels decisive: are the powerful *cynics* who know the arrangement is a contrivance held up by force and defend it anyway, or *believers* so formed by its flattering story that they defend it in good faith? The cynic's answer points to a conspiracy of knowing exploiters; the innocent's, to a society of the honestly mistaken. The question keeps returning because both are partly right and neither wholly, so that every settling of it is pulled open again.

This study resolves the quarrel not by deciding it but by showing it is asked on the wrong axis. The better axis is not belief but *position*. The cynic's half is held at full strength — there are conscious architects who built and held their arrangements in cold knowledge, and the slaveholder, the framers who wrote slavery into the constitution, the authors of the Black Codes, and the Spartans who culled the Helots prove it. But even the clearest architect is almost never a pure nihilist: Cato sold his worn-out slaves like old tools and at the same time held that a man who enlarged his estate deserved to be glorified like a god. Sincerity and cynicism are braided past any outside untangling — which is the clue that the question is wrong.

For the powerful of a settled order are a mixed population — a few architects, many formed inheritors, a great mass of position-holding latecomers who merely rose within rules they never wrote — and what unites them is not a shared belief or a shared plot but a shared position, which each defends for the most ordinary reason there is. Position-logic predicts the same defence whether a man is sincere or cynical, so the heart need not be read; and in a mature order, the defence of one's own position is, by default, the defence of the whole, so that the arrangement reproduces itself through ordinary self-interest, needing no conspiracy because the structure does the conspiracy's work. The study leans on Plutarch and Thucydides for the architects, and on Lindblom and Poulantzas for the structural default; it grants that threat assembles real coordination, and ends by locating the only lever that moves a settled order — not the unmasking of villains nor the converting of believers, but the re-pricing of positions.

A Note on This Collaboration

As throughout, the spine is Thomas J. Bryan's — here, his refusal to harp on the sincerity of the powerful, on the ground that it is too hard to tell, and his preference for reading a person's position instead. The insight is precise and hard-won: that the slaveholder knew exactly what he was doing, that a mature order nonetheless needs no cabal because defending one's position defends the arrangement by default, and that what looks like conspiracy is the reactive convergence of self-defending position-holders. The model's work has been to set that lived reading beside the scholarship that reached it from the academy — the structural theory of state power, the logic of collective action, the rent-seeking literature — and to find, again, one structure described from two sides.

The study keeps the project's disciplines with care, because the subject invites both paranoia and apology. It holds the cynic's truth at full strength and then shows its limit; it grants the structural account of power and holds its counter, that beneficiaries do not always prevail and that the structure is not a conspiracy; it treats the powerful neither as monsters nor as saints but as people in positions. It refuses to claim knowledge of what cannot be seen — the inside of a heart — and rests its conclusions on what can. The whole is held as tested, not revealed.

The Argument in Eight Parts

I — The Question That Keeps Returning. The recurring quarrel over whether the powerful are cynics or sincere believers is the wrong quarrel. It dissolves once one stops trying to read the heart and looks instead at the position — for the cynic and the believer defend the arrangement identically, and only the defending can be seen.

II — The Conscious Architect Is Real. The cynic's half of the truth held at full strength: there are men who built and maintained their arrangements in cold, deliberate knowledge — the slaveholder, the framers, the Black Codes, the Spartan culling of the Helots — and the rawest extraction makes that knowledge impossible to hide.

III — Even the Architect Is Robed. Yet the cynic overstates, for even the clearest architect is almost never a pure nihilist: he is a man formed to believe his extraction his right, his virtue, his duty. Cato sold his worn-out slaves like old tools and held that enlarging the estate made a man godlike.

IV — The Inheritor and the Latecomer. The powerful of a settled order are not uniform designers but a mixed population: the conscious architects a vanishing few, the formed inheritors many, and the largest group of all the latecomers who merely rose within an arrangement they never built. They are not a cabal. They are position-holders.

V — Position, Not Sincerity. Whether the powerful are sincere or cynical is both unanswerable — the inside of belief cannot be read from outside, and is often hidden from the man himself — and unnecessary, because position-logic predicts the same defence either way. The wise analyst reads the position and lets the heart alone.

VI — The Default. In a settled order, and above all in a liberal democracy, the defence of one's own position is by default the defence of the whole: defend your wealth, you defend property; defend property, you defend the constitution; defend the constitution, you defend the arrangement. No cabal is needed, because the structure does the conspiracy's work — Lindblom's privileged position of business, Poulantzas's impersonal state. The machine runs itself.

VII — What Looks Like a Cabal. The absence of a standing conspiracy is not the absence of coordination. When the arrangement is genuinely threatened, the parallel self-defence of many position-holders converges into real, funded resistance — rent-seeking, the easy combination of the concentrated few against the dispersed many — which the cynic mistakes for the permanent cabal he was always sure existed.

VIII — The Use of Looking at Position. Reading position rather than sincerity disarms both the conspiracy theory and the apology, locates the only lever that moves a settled order — the re-pricing of positions — and turns out to be not the coldest way of regarding the powerful but the most exact, and in its refusal to hate, the most merciful.

A Note on Sources

This study joins an observation of the project's own to the ancient record of conscious domination and the modern theory of structural power.

The conscious architects. The Spartan krypteia — the young men sent out with daggers to kill the sturdiest Helots, and the ephors' annual declaration of war so that the killing carried no impiety — is from Plutarch's "Life of Lycurgus," with the vanishing of the two thousand crowned Helots from Thucydides; both are quoted as public-domain texts. Cato's use of his slaves "to the uttermost" and his maxim that a man who enlarged his inheritance should be "admired and glorified like a god" are from Plutarch's "Life of Cato the Elder" and Cato's own "De Agricultura." The constitutional protection of slavery and the Black Codes of 1865–1866 are drawn from the standard record.

The structural default. That a market-society government serves business not by conspiracy but by structural dependence on the jobs and investment in private hands — the "privileged position of business" — is Charles Lindblom's, in "Politics and Markets" (1977). That the state serves the arrangement because of its impersonal structural position rather than the personnel who staff it is Nicos Poulantzas's, against the instrumental account associated with Ralph Miliband. The easy combination of the concentrated few against the dispersed many is Mancur Olson's logic of collective action; the expenditure to defend one's benefits is the rent-seeking of the public-choice economists. Modern works are paraphrased and credited.

The lineage. Beneath all of it lies this project's own corpus — position-logic and its two caveats, the architect and the inheritor, the cost column and the dials that re-price a position, the robe that clothes the extractor to himself, and the machine that runs itself — of which this study is the resolution of the question of sincerity.

PART I

THE QUESTION THAT KEEPS RETURNING

That the recurring quarrel over whether the powerful are cynical schemers who know the arrangement is a racket or sincere believers formed to think it just is the wrong quarrel — and that the question dissolves once one stops trying to read the heart and looks instead at the position

A single question has surfaced again and again across this whole project, and it surfaces because it feels decisive: are the powerful *cynics* or *believers*? Do the men at the top know that the arrangement which favours them is a contrivance held up by force and dressed in a flattering story — and defend it anyway, in cold knowledge — or have they been so thoroughly formed by that same story that they sincerely believe the arrangement just, and defend it in good faith? The cynic's answer and the innocent's answer point to opposite worlds: one to a conspiracy of knowing exploiters, the other to a society of the honestly mistaken. And the reason the question keeps returning is that both answers are partly right and neither is wholly right, so that every time it seems settled, a counter-example pulls it open again. This study takes the question head-on, and resolves it — not by finally deciding whether the powerful are sincere or cynical, but by showing that this is the wrong axis on which to ask, and that a better one cuts straight through the knot.

The axis that cuts through

The better axis is not belief but *position*. The decisive fact about a powerful man, for the purpose of predicting whether he will defend the arrangement, is not what he privately believes about it — which is hidden, often even from him, and which this study will argue can almost never be read from outside — but where he *stands* in it: what it gives him, what he would lose if it changed, what his interest, by the plainest reckoning, requires him to protect. For it turns out that the cynic and the believer, asked to do the one thing that matters — defend the arrangement — *do the same thing*, for the same structural reason, regardless of which of them is right about the contents of anyone's heart. The man who knows the order is a racket defends it because it pays him; the man who sincerely thinks it just defends it because he thinks it just *and* it pays him; and from the outside, where only the defending can be seen, the two are indistinguishable and, for the purpose of understanding how the order holds, identical. The thesis of this study is therefore that the question of sincerity, however fascinating, is both unanswerable and unnecessary — and that the thing which actually reproduces a settled order is not a shared belief or a shared plot but a shared *position*, defended by each holder for the most ordinary reason there is, so that in a mature arrangement the defence of the whole comes about, without conspiracy and without consensus, *by default*.

PART II

THE CONSCIOUS ARCHITECT IS REAL

That the cynic's half of the truth must be held at full strength — for there are men who built and maintained their arrangements in cold and deliberate knowledge of exactly what they were doing, and the rawest forms of extraction make that knowledge impossible to hide

Before the argument can earn the right to set sincerity aside, it must do full justice to the cynic's half of the truth, because that half is real and the project would be lying to soften it. There are, and have always been, *conscious architects* — men who built and maintained their arrangements in cold, deliberate, fully-seeing knowledge of exactly what they were doing, with no haze of sincere conviction to excuse them. The slaveholder is the standing refutation of every claim that the powerful merely know not what they do. A man who owns other human beings, who buys and sells them, who calculates their yield and disposes of them when they are spent, is not formed into a comfortable haze about the nature of his arrangement; he is in daily, intimate, administrative contact with its violence. And the documentary record of such arrangements is a record of deliberate design, not of sleepwalking.

The architects who wrote it down

The men who framed the American constitution wrote the protection of slavery into it on purpose, in plain clauses — the count of the unfree as fractions of persons, the guaranteed return of those who fled, the two decades during which the trade in human beings could not be touched — bargains struck with open eyes by men who knew precisely what they were trading. When emancipation came and the freed could no longer be owned, the same consciousness simply changed instruments: the southern Black Codes of 1865 and 1866 were deliberate legislation, drafted to bind the freedman back into controlled labour by vagrancy statutes and contract penalties and restrictions on movement — a designed re-subordination, not an accident. And the ancient world shows the architecture stripped of every euphemism. The Spartans held down their vast enslaved Helot population by a method the historians recorded without flinching: the magistrates, Plutarch reports, sent chosen young men out into the countryside with daggers, to hide by day and by night to kill the Helots they caught, and especially "the sturdiest and best of them" — and, so that this annual harvest of the strongest should carry no taint of murder, the ephors formally *declared war on the Helots every year*, that there might be no impiety in the killing. Thucydides records the method in its coldest form: some two thousand of the bravest Helots, promised their freedom and crowned for it, were marched in procession and then made to vanish, no man able to say how they died. This was not a society that had drifted into terror without noticing. It was a deliberate, institutional, annually-renewed program for murdering the natural leaders of a subject people before they could lead — designed, maintained, and known. The conscious architect is real, and at the rawest end of extraction his knowledge cannot be hidden, because the work itself will not let him forget what he is doing.

PART III

EVEN THE ARCHITECT IS ROBED

That the cynic nonetheless overstates his case, because even the most clear-eyed architect is almost never a pure nihilist who knows his arrangement to be a mere swindle — he is, at the same time, a man formed to believe that his extraction is his right, his virtue, even his sacred duty

And yet the cynic overstates even here, at the rawest end where his case is strongest, and the overstatement matters because it is the hinge of the whole argument. The conscious architect is real; but the conscious architect is almost never the thing the cynic imagines him to be — a pure nihilist who knows the whole arrangement to be a swindle and defends it in naked bad faith. He is something stranger and more human: a man who sees the mechanism clearly *and at the same time sincerely believes he has every right to work it.* The consciousness and the conviction coexist. He knows he is extracting; he does not, as a rule, believe he is doing wrong. The robe this project has traced does not stop at the heads of the masses; it climbs all the way to the top, and clothes the architect to himself.

Cato's god, and the noble tradition

The figure of Cato the Elder shows the two things fused in a single Roman. No man was a colder administrator of human property. He treated his slaves, Plutarch records, like beasts of burden, "using them to the uttermost, and then, when they were old, driving them off and selling them" — and his own farming manual lists, with no more feeling than a quartermaster, the worn-out slave among the items a prudent master should sell off, alongside the old ox, the broken tools, and the scrap iron. This is consciousness without illusion. And yet Cato was no nihilist; he was a moralist, and his cold extraction was, to him, a positive *virtue*. He held that to let one's estate shrink was unmanly, the part of a widow rather than a man, and he declared — Plutarch preserves the words — that a man deserved to be "admired and glorified like a god" if the final accounting of his property showed that he had increased what he had inherited. The squeezing of the last denarius from a dying slave was not, in Cato's mind, a crime he was getting away with; it was the discharge of a sacred duty to enlarge the patrimony, a thing that made a man godlike. So too the Spartans, who did not skulk in shame about the killing of Helots but, many of them, "thought that killing slaves was a noble tradition." The architect, then, is not the cynic's pure knowing villain. He is a man who has been formed to experience his own extraction as his right, his competence, and frequently his highest virtue — which means that even at the very bottom of the moral scale, where the violence is nakedest and the knowledge most undeniable, *sincerity and cynicism are already braided together past the point where any outside eye could pull them apart.* And if they cannot be separated even in Cato, they certainly cannot be separated in a modern billionaire. Which is the clue that we have been asking the wrong question.

PART IV

THE INHERITOR AND THE LATECOMER

That the powerful of a settled order are not a uniform class of knowing designers but a mixed population in which the conscious architects are a vanishing few, the formed inheritors are many, and the largest group of all simply arrived after the arrangement was built and occupy positions within it they never designed

If the architect end of the spectrum is more complicated than the cynic allows, the rest of the spectrum dismantles his picture entirely — for the powerful of a mature, settled order are not, in the main, architects at all. The study of the architect and the inheritor showed that the conscious designer's clarity does not survive him: it routinises, congeals into office and inheritance, and is replaced within a few generations by heirs who run on position rather than knowledge and who could not explain the machine they sit atop. But that study traced the drift mainly through time, from founders to grandsons. The fuller truth is that in any settled order the whole spectrum exists *at once*, as a mixed population — and the mixture is heavily weighted away from the architect.

The three kinds at the summit

At the top of a long-standing order such as the modern American one, three kinds of people stand together. There are, first, the genuine architects — the vanishingly few who still grasp the design, who could tell you what the arrangement is for and how its belief is managed; and they are rare, because such clarity is rare and the order does not require it. There are, second, the formed inheritors — the old families and established powers who hold their positions as the shape of the world, who would defend the existing order to the last but who, if asked, could no more expound the actual workings of the constitution that protects their wealth than recite its clauses from memory. And there is, third and most numerous of all, a category the architect-and-inheritor study did not name: the *latecomers*, the men and women who arrived long after the arrangement was built and simply rose within it — who got rich under rules they did not write, occupying positions the system held open, and who bear no more relation to the original design than a tenant bears to the laying of a building's foundations. It is a serious error — the cynic's central error — to imagine the richest men of the present age as a council of architects conspiring over the blueprint to hold the multitude at subsistence. The wealthiest figures of the modern economy did not design the property system, the constitutional order, or the global division of labour; they succeeded *within* arrangements already standing, and they are no more the authors of those arrangements than a champion is the author of the rules of his game. They are not a cabal. They are position-holders — which, this study will now argue, is all that the reproduction of the order requires them to be.

PART V

POSITION, NOT SINCERITY

That the question of whether the powerful are sincere or cynical is both unanswerable, because the inside of a man's belief cannot be read from outside and is often hidden from himself, and unnecessary, because position-logic predicts the same defence of the arrangement whichever he is — so the wise analyst reads the position and lets the heart alone

Gather the spectrum — the robed architect, the formed inheritor, the position-holding latecomer — and the reason the sincerity question keeps failing becomes plain: it is asking for a fact that cannot be obtained and does not matter. It cannot be obtained, because the contents of a man's belief are the one thing about him that no outside observer can verify. A professed conviction may be wholly sincere, or a performance for advantage, or — most commonly — a sincere self-justification that is *also* exquisitely convenient, and the man himself frequently cannot tell which, because the mind that benefits from a belief is the last mind equipped to audit it. To demand, before analysing an order, that we first determine whether its beneficiaries *really* believe in it is to make the analysis wait upon a measurement that can never be taken.

Why the heart does not need reading

And the measurement does not need taking, because — and this is the liberating core of the whole study — *position-logic predicts the same behaviour whichever the answer is.* Recall the rule and its two caveats: a person acts on benefit against cost, where benefit is fixed by what he values and cost by what will be credibly enforced. Now apply it to the beneficiary of an arrangement, and observe that his belief about the arrangement's *justice* drops almost entirely out of the calculation, because either way the arrangement sits on the benefit side of his ledger. If he sincerely thinks the order just, he defends it as a just order that also happens to enrich him. If he privately thinks it a racket, he defends it as a racket that enriches him. The cynic and the believer arrive at the identical act — *defend the arrangement* — by routes that differ only in a private chamber no one can enter, and that make no difference to the outcome. It is, the project has insisted from the start, abnormal for a person to surrender what benefits him; and a beneficiary will move to protect his position against a threat as reliably as water moves downhill, whatever he tells himself or others about why. This is why the experienced eye learns to stop reading the heart and read the position instead. The position is *observable* — one can see what a man holds, what he would lose, where his interest lies — while the sincerity is forever sealed. An analysis that rests on the observable can predict; an analysis that rests on the sealed can only speculate, and usually speculates in the direction of its own prior suspicion. To look at position rather than sincerity is not cynicism. It is the discipline of resting one's conclusions on what can actually be seen.

PART VI

THE DEFAULT

That in a settled order, and above all in a liberal democracy, the arrangement has been built so that the defence of one's own position is, automatically and without intention, the defence of the whole — so that the order reproduces itself through the ordinary self-interest of its beneficiaries, needing no conspiracy because the structure does the conspiracy's work

Now the keystone, the mechanism that turns a population of mere position-holders into the unbreakable defence of a whole arrangement without a single one of them needing to intend it. In a settled order — and supremely in a mature liberal democracy — the arrangement has been built, or has evolved, so that *the defence of one's own position is, by default, the defence of the entire structure.* The two are welded together, so that a man pursuing nothing beyond his own plain interest reproduces the whole order as an automatic by-product, the way a man walking to his own door wears the path that everyone after him will follow. Consider how this works in the American case. To defend one's wealth, one defends the property rights that secure it. To defend property rights, one defends the constitution that guarantees them and the courts that enforce them. To defend the constitution, one defends the entire settled arrangement of which private property is the keystone. A man need not believe in the arrangement, nor understand it, nor wish to perpetuate it; he need only defend his own position within it — the most ordinary thing a person ever does — and he will have defended the whole, *by default*, without ever forming the intention. The order has arranged for its own reproduction to ride on the back of universal self-interest.

Why no cabal is needed

This is why the conspiracy theory is not merely unproven but *unnecessary* — why a settled order needs no cabal, and would gain nothing from one. A conspiracy is a mechanism for coordinating people toward an end none of them would reach separately. But a mature arrangement needs no such coordination, because it has engineered the situation so that its beneficiaries reach the end — the reproduction of the order — *separately, by each pursuing his own interest alone.* The structure does the work the conspiracy theory imagines a cabal doing. This is precisely the insight that the more sophisticated students of power reached when they abandoned the crude picture of capitalists personally pulling the state's strings. The political scientist Charles Lindblom called it the "privileged position of business": a government in a market society serves the interests of business not because businessmen secretly run it but because the government structurally *depends* on business — on the jobs, the investment, the growth, the revenues that lie in private hands — so that any government, of any party, staffed by anyone, must keep business confident or watch the economy and its own legitimacy sink. The theorist Nicos Poulantzas drew the same distinction against those who explained the capitalist state by the personnel who staffed it: the state serves the arrangement, he argued, not because of *who holds the offices* but because of its structural position, so that the outcome would be much the same whoever held them. The character of the thing is impersonal. No one need conspire, because the structure has made the conspiracy redundant — and this is the deepest and most literal sense of the phrase that named this project at its founding: the machine runs itself. It runs itself precisely because it has converted the defence of every separate position into the defence of the whole, so that it is maintained, tirelessly and without direction, by people who are merely minding their own business.

PART VII

WHAT LOOKS LIKE A CABAL

That the absence of a standing conspiracy does not mean the absence of coordination — for when the arrangement is genuinely threatened, the parallel self-defence of many separate position-holders converges into real, funded, organised resistance, which the cynic mistakes for the permanent cabal he was always sure existed

The argument that a settled order needs no cabal must now be guarded against its own overstatement, for it would be a new naivety to conclude that the powerful never coordinate at all. They do — and the cynic, pointing to that coordination, believes he has caught the conspiracy red-handed. The truth lies between his standing cabal and the innocent's perfect spontaneity, and position-logic locates it exactly. So long as the arrangement is secure, no coordination is needed; each beneficiary defends the whole by default, separately, simply by minding his position. But when the arrangement is genuinely *threatened* — when a movement rises or a law is drafted that would actually redistribute wealth or power — the position-logic of every beneficiary fires at once and in the same direction, because a threat to the arrangement is a threat to each of their positions simultaneously. And parallel self-defence, when the threat is large enough, *converges into coordination*: the threatened begin to fund the same politicians, amplify the same arguments, back the same demagogues who promise to break the movement, combine their resources against the common danger.

Convergence is not conspiracy

This looks, to the cynic, exactly like the cabal he always suspected — and the resemblance is the source of his enduring error. But it is not a standing conspiracy directing the order from the shadows; it is a *reactive convergence*, triggered by threat, of many separate ledgers that happen to read the same way at the same moment. The economists have a plain name for the everyday form of it — *rent-seeking*, the expenditure of resources by those who benefit from an arrangement to defend the benefits it yields them — and a plain account of why the defenders out-organise the challengers, given long ago by the logic of collective action: the beneficiaries of a settlement are few and concentrated, each with a great deal at stake, and so they combine easily and fund their defence lavishly, while the multitude who would gain from change are many and dispersed, each with little individually at stake, and so they organise with difficulty and underfund their challenge. The asymmetry is structural, not conspiratorial. The Spartans coordinated to cull the Helots; the medieval lords of the east, when scarcity threatened to free their serfs, colluded to bind them; the slaveholders coordinated their secession when the arrangement that held their human property came under threat — and in each case the coordination was real, but it was the convergent self-defence of position-holders facing a shared threat, not the standing design of a timeless conspiracy. The order is not run by a cabal. But threaten it, and the cabal the cynic imagines will assemble itself before his eyes, out of nothing but a thousand men each protecting his own — and dissolve again, back into the quiet automatic defence of default, the moment the threat recedes.

Part VIII

THE USE OF LOOKING AT POSITION

That reading position rather than sincerity disarms both the conspiracy theory and the apology at once, locates the only lever that actually moves a settled order, and turns out to be not the coldest way of regarding the powerful but the most exact and, in its refusal to hate, the most merciful

Gather the argument and it resolves the question that kept returning by dissolving it. The powerful of a settled order are not uniformly cynics nor uniformly believers; they are a mixed population — a few robed architects, many formed inheritors, a great mass of position-holding latecomers — across whom sincerity and self-interest are braided past any outside untangling. What unites them is not a shared belief, which they do not have, nor a shared plot, which they do not need, but a shared *position*, which each defends for the most ordinary of reasons; and because a mature order has welded the defence of each position to the defence of the whole, the order reproduces itself by default, through ordinary self-interest, needing no conspiracy because the structure performs the conspiracy's office — assembling real coordination only when it is threatened, and dissolving it again when the threat is past.

The lever, and the mercy

Two consequences follow, and they are the use of the whole analysis. The first is that reading position rather than sincerity disarms, at a single stroke, both of the errors that have always clouded the subject. It disarms the *conspiracy theory*, by showing that the defence of the order requires no knowing cabal and that the search for one is therefore a search for a thing that need not exist — a search that wastes the searcher's credibility and lets the real, structural mechanism hide behind his wild pointing. And it disarms the *apology* with equal force, by showing that the sincerity of the powerful, even where it is perfectly genuine, is no defence of the arrangement whatsoever — for the position-holder will defend the order exactly as hard whether he believes in it or not, so that "but they truly mean well" explains nothing about why the order persists and excuses nothing about its effects. The second consequence is the practical one, and it points back through the whole corpus to the only lever that has ever moved a settled order. If the arrangement is held in place neither by a conspiracy that could be exposed nor by a sincere consent that could be argued away, but by the plain position-logic of its beneficiaries, then it cannot be changed by unmasking villains who are not there, nor by converting believers whose belief was never the load-bearing thing. It can be changed only by altering what position-logic feeds on: by raising the cost of defending the old arrangement, or the benefit of accepting a new one — by re-pricing the positions themselves, which is the work of the cost column, the turning of the dials, the opening that comes when the floor cracks. And there is, finally, a quiet mercy in seeing the powerful this way, which is worth naming because it is so rarely noticed. To look at position rather than sincerity is to refuse to claim knowledge of what cannot be seen — the inside of another's heart — and to rest instead on what can. It treats the powerful not as the conspiracy theory's monsters nor as the apology's saints, but as people in positions, doing the most universal and forgivable thing a person does, which is to defend what sustains them. And that vision, colder though it sounds, is in the end the more humane, because it lets us set about changing the arrangement without first having to hate the people caught inside it — to remake the order by re-pricing its positions rather than by hunting its villains, which is the only way the work has ever actually been done, and the only way it can be done without becoming the very thing it set out to cure.